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ABSTRACT

As yet there is no comprehensive, systematic, demonstrably effective program for maximizing empathetic communication behaviors. What is needed are theories, concepts, and methods that would provide for such learning. One avenue of approach is to search for models and metaphors that would allow for an encompassing comprehension of empathy and empathic communication--moving away from traditional frameworks that anchor empathic notions on the concept of dialogue. Another avenue of approach is to recognize empathic communication as a multichannel process, involving both verbal and nonverbal messages and cues. A final avenue of approach is to study high empathic communicators to determine what philosophies underlie their empathic behavior, and thereby provide effective role models. Of course these three approaches only scratch the surface of what might be done in the exploration of empathic communication development. Since it is clear that empathy is a multidimensional cognitive-affective-social macroprocess, nothing less than multimethodological approaches are likely to suffice. (HOD)

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The Search for Multi-Methodological Approaches
to Empathic Communication Development

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The Search for Multi-Methodological Approaches to Empathic Communication Development

Abstract

At this point, we in communication studies cannot claim that we can provide a comprehensive, systematic, demonstrably effective program for maximizing empathic communication behaviors. We need to search for theories, concepts, and methods that will allow us to provide such learning. Three initial avenues of approach are suggested: (1) the search for alternate paradigms to supplement the dialogical model, (2) the recognition of empathic communication as a multichannel process, and (3) the study of highly empathic communicators.

The Search for Multi-Methodological Approaches to Empathic Communication Development

In a recent paper titled "Empathy: The State of the Art and Science," Gordon has noted that "in spite of the recognized importance of empathy in human communication, it is curious that we have so loose a grasp on the fundamental nature of empathy, and on ways of increasing the empathic tendencies of human communicators."¹ His review of the speech communication literature reveals a paucity of attention given to empathy and empathy-building.² On the face of it, the role of empathy in effective human communication would seem to be an important one (Gary Cronkhite has gone so far as to surmise that empathy "is probably the most valuable asset a communicator can acquire"),³ yet no research evidence has accumulated to suggest that our communication coursework does indeed enhance our learners' empathic communication abilities or tendencies.⁴

Let us be skeptical for the moment, in advance of the relevant data that have yet to be secured, and assume that we do little in the typical communication skills classroom to substantially modify learners' empathic behaviors in a way that is likely to be generalized to daily interpersonal transactions outside the classroom environment: would this be any wonder? The highly routinized egocentric attitudes and behaviors that need to be changed in order for a person to be able to cognitively and affectively put himself in the position of another person are not of the sort that are readily susceptible to alteration.⁵ To impact communicators' empathic abilities, and their "real-life" empathic communication behaviors, is no

minor feat. Rogers' paraphrasing exercise or role-playing (with feedback), while useful, are too restricted in scope to be relied upon as our sole or primary vehicles for empathy development. No casual classroom exercises are likely to suffice. For any hope of generalizable empathy changes to accrue, a powerful multi-methodological educational approach would seem needed.

Of what would such a program consist? I do not exactly know. What I do know is that in order to create an efficacious empathy-building project we will need to turn to an array of disciplines, creatively searching for possible theory, knowledge, insights, and practices. I believe we will need to "back off" a bit, and look at the empathic process broadly, as it manifests aspects of itself in a wide-range of seemingly unrelated contexts and forms. We will need an openmindedness to guide this search, an exploratoriness, even a playfulness. In this paper I would like to briefly speculate on just a few of the places where we might profitably begin to look. I will suggest three avenues of approach: (1) the search for supplemental paradigms, (2) the recognition of empathic communication as multichannel process, and (3) the study of highly empathic communicators. These are far from being exhaustive possibilities.

The Search for Supplemental Paradigms

Anyone who is to be meaningfully taught about empathic communication needs to be provided with an underlying foundation that will ground and surround any specific exercises and techniques to be used. Techniques that do not extend from within a larger theoretical context are too isolated and disconnected from a stable underpinning, and fail to 'make sense' to

the learner in light of a larger whole. Methods devoid of a framework are not well-anchored, and permit excess drift. What is the larger point-of-view from which empathic communication can best be envisioned? I am not certain. The traditional framework used within our discipline to anchor empathic notions and methods has been Buber's conception of "dialogue," including the elements of "the Between" and the "I and Thou" versus the "I and It."⁶ Rogers' model of the helping relationship has also been drawn on, and combined with Buber's dialogical model.⁷ Stewart has written of the philosophical roots of the dialogical model, and while some of this line of thinking would be intelligible to the average learner and candidate for behavior change, much would not.⁸

We should probably be open to complementary models, fresh vantage points from which to help our students view empathic communication. Alternative or supplementary frameworks would allow for greater flexibility and adaptability. As just one example, I think of a wonderful little book by philosopher Milton Mayeroff that was published nearly fifteen years ago, titled On Caring.⁹ Mayeroff extends and enriches the notion of "caring" on each page of this delightful work. "Caring" is depicted as having a way of ordering other values and activities around itself in a person's life; "caring" provides stability in life, being "in place" in the world due to the inclusiveness of one's carings. Mayeroff begins his treatise in this way: "In the sense in which a man can ever be said to be at home in the world, he is at home not through dominating, or explaining, or appreciating, but through caring and being cared for."¹⁰ Mayeroff concludes his work with this thought: "But I cannot thank (care for) life in general. I can only thank life by caring for this or that instance of it."¹¹ If one is to evolve an empathic regard for others, and a willingness and

ability to communicate this, attainment would be facilitated by being rooted in a perspective that has substance. Decisions and behavioral choices often best emanate from a point-of-view, and it is just such points-of-view that will be of use to any attempt to empathy-building. We are in need of more points-of-view from which to construe the rationale behind the empathic choice, i. e., why empathy is useful and makes sense. Brainstorming is in order. The quest for pragmatic empathic perspectives should be one of our priorities. This is not to suggest that the dialogical model be abandoned, but only that additional possibilities also be discovered and discussed, with the eventual aim of making sense to learners and supporting the empathic choice.

Intercultural research would enrich our knowledge in this realm. For example, we in communication have insufficiently examined East Asian thought with an aim toward understanding the conception of empathy depicted there. We have suffered from a Western bias; it is simply not true to conclude that "Empathy is a latecomer to our stock of ideas, being scarcely a hundred years old."¹² While the English word "empathy" is indeed young,¹³ the process to which it refers is not alien to ancient East Asian thought. It may be a latecomer to the Western stock of ideas, and this is good reason for learning from the East. I think, for instance, of the notion of ishin-denshin, originally a Chinese concept but since adopted in other areas of Asia as well (especially in Japan), and roughly translated as "mind-to-mind communication," or "intuitive communication."¹⁴ Stemming from Zen Buddhism, ishin-denshin pertains to direct cognition of the essence of the object of perception, independent of logical analysis. A related concept of "tacit communication" is sasshi; a Japanese husband might glance at his wife's flower arrangement upon entering their home and have

a reasonably good indication of how the wife is feeling that day, just by observing her flowers. Many traditional Japanese appear to have this type of perceptive sensibility refined more highly than does the typical Westerner.

East Asian thought, on the whole, differs from Western thought in several major ways: Western thought emphasizes rationality, Eastern thought values intuition; Western thought stresses dominance over nature, Eastern encourages blending with nature. Western thought has highlighted a mind/body dichotomy, Eastern accentuates the interpenetration of mind, body, soul; Western thought exaggerates duality in general, Eastern thought emphasizes unity; Western thought stresses individuality, personality, ego, while Eastern philosophy values egoless forms of selfhood.¹⁵ Suzuki has contrasted Western and Eastern thought by comparing two poems, one by Bashō and the other by Tennyson. Bashō writes:

When I look carefully
I see the nazuna blooming
by the hedge!

Tennyson writes:

Lower in the crannied wall
I pluck you out of the crannies;--
Hold you here, root and all, and all in all,
I should know what God and man is.¹⁶

Tennyson plucks the flower, Bashō does not. Tennyson aggresses upon the world, tearing the flower from its place, attempting to satisfy his own analytical curiosity, the subject/object dichotomy prevails. Deeply understanding these two contrasting modes of apprehending reality, the way of Bashō and the way of Tennyson, might be worthwhile for those of us who seek to discover the fullest meaning of empathic responding.

I must quickly and strongly emphasize that I am not urging a return to the "pop-zen" faddism of a decade ago, a hasty mass flirtation with

that which seemed exotic and worthy of superficial attention. We see another preoccupation with East Asia today, with Western business leaders trying to learn what makes Eastern business practices so successful.¹⁷

I am reluctant to have the suggestions here identified with these trends. It is unfortunate in this sense that the turn toward East Asia has so absorbed the popular awareness, since it makes it unlikely that serious academics will choose to be affiliated with such popularism. The fact remains, however, that quiet, responsible, respectful exploration of pertinent paradigms that have survived the centuries would seem to serve constructive purpose for a discipline that admittedly knows so little about the empathic process, including empathic communication.

It may be that we have something to learn about empathy not only from Eastern Asia, but from an array of cultural schools of thought and life practices around the world. These cultural models, however, offer only a partial contribution; within our own culture there too is certainly an untapped diversity of schemas, mental matrices and models that will better allow us to conceive and convey methods of empathy development. It does not so much matter, in the beginning, where exactly we look for perspectives, but rather that we enter an idea-generation stage, unimpeded by premature criticality. Again, the aim is not the abandonment of the dialogical model, but the provision of additional models and metaphors to allow for an even more encompassing comprehension of empathy and empathic communication.

Empathic Communication: A Multichannel Process

It is not uncommon to read research that has been done on empathy training (usually reported in counseling journals) that construes empathy

as largely a verbal process; attention is paid to the verbal content of what communicator B said (or hypothetically would say) to communicator A to judge how empathic that verbal response of B might be. In other words, accuracy of paraphrase is sometimes equated with empathy, as is saying words that seem sensitive in meaning.¹⁸ Even in the exciting line of research within our own discipline on "comforting communication," it is the content analysis of written responses or transcripts that is used to assess the degree to which a given instance of communication is "comforting."¹⁹ Yet there is a body of research (mostly within counseling journals) to suggest that the role of nonverbal behavior within the realm of empathic communication is primary. It is important that we not lose sight of this for too long when we focus upon the verbal aspects of empathic communication.

Two of the more active researchers in the counseling field, for instance, note the "almost unbelievable power of facial expression" in the communication of empathy and other related variables: in a counseling context 26% of the variability in judged empathy was accounted for by facial expression (main effects).²⁰ The total group of nonverbal cues (facial expression, eye contact, trunk lean, and vocal intonation) accounted for over twice the variability in judged empathy accounted for by the verbal message alone. Another group of researchers has shown that counselors who used high levels of eye contact (over 90%) and forward trunk lean and direct body orientation (100%) were not only rated as being more empathic than when they used lower levels of these behaviors (i.e., less than 40% of the time), but higher levels of these nonverbal behaviors also significantly improved the degree of communicated empathy even when the verbal content was altered and held at a low empathy level.²¹ These

studies and others demonstrate the overwhelming importance of nonverbal messages and cues in the empathic communication process, and that we are indeed dealing with a multichannel system.

Yet to tell a communicator to be aware of his or her facial expression or to make eye contact does not go far enough. To truly come into solid regard for what it means to be an empathic communicator, knowledge of more transactional concepts such as postural congruence and rhythmic entrainment and interactional synchrony are appropriate.²² The fact that interpersonal communication is in part a micromomentary dance of interconnected movements between and among communicators needs to be understood by learners in this area. I am thinking, for example, of another and more recent study in the counseling context which showed that postural congruence, i.e., subtly imitating the kinesic position of the other communicator, affected perceptions of being empathically understood by the communicator doing the mirror-image imitating.²³ Again, this is not to say that learners should be encouraged to memorize a standard set of body language techniques and messages for manipulating the perceptions of the other; rather, they will need to be schooled in a sophisticated, poetic outlook on the bodily intricacies of the rhythmic transactional dance that transpires between human communicators when they form a face-to-face communication system. These learners will need to be provided with a thick-dimensional sense of the nonverbal microprocesses that are involved in the macroprocess that is empathic communication. At the moment, most of us are probably not in much of a position to do this in any coherent and attractive fashion. For example, postural congruence, rhythmic entrainment, and interactional synchrony represent a cluster of phenomena that we in speech communication do not yet know much about. That is precisely why they have been mentioned

here: we will need to know what it means to teach that empathic communication is a multichannel process.

The Study of Highly Empathic Communicators

It would certainly be useful to identify and study persons who seem to be highly skilled in empathic communication: What philosophies underlie their empathic behavior? Exactly how, nonverbally and verbally, do they convey their empathy? What lessons, tools, and experiences can they isolate as having contributed to their empathic development?

Also, one of the most effective ways for human beings to learn is to repeatedly witness the behavior of effective role models. Reinforcement without modeling can be a rather slow learning strategy. It may be that when it comes to learning empathic behaviors, we lack clear, prominent role models. Aside from Carl Rogers or Mother Teresa of Calcutta, who can we quickly name as empathic role models worthy of emulation? In a 1985 survey conducted by U. S. News and World Report, 18-to-24 year-olds were asked "Who are your heroes or heroines--that is, what public figures living anywhere in the world do you find personally inspiring and would hope you could be like in some way?"²⁴ The number one choice was Clint Eastwood, out-polling Mother Teresa 3:1.

There are studies that indicate that the learning of empathic communication behaviors is aided by the observation of modeled empathic behavior.²⁵ In addition to constructing thirty-second audio- and videotape models of empathic communication (as is often done in counseling training), we should also endeavor to study real-life empathic communicators, and possibly even acquire videotape collections of some of these persons in action. As well as searching for highly empathic communicators

generally, there are likely to be certain professions that would be especially good places to look. Medicine might not be one of these, since there is some indication that medical students are lower in empathy when they complete medical school than when they begin (and possibly for good reason);²⁶ neither is the legal profession likely to be a haven of empathic behavior.²⁷ Cultural anthropology, however, offers promise.

Recently I attended a lecture by a cultural anthropologist from Australia who described her long-term research on the rituals of Balinese folk healers. She had become quite fluent in Balinese, and had lived in Bali for a number of years, apparently adapting to the local culture reasonably well. She had observed hundreds of Balinese "trance" rituals, and had interviewed dozens of healers repeatedly and intensively. She is the first anthropologist to record on film some of this activity. After we had, for an hour and a half, listened to and watched this anthropologist at work, attempting to totally understand the meaning of the ritual behavior she had chosen to study, perhaps the most noteworthy question of the evening was asked: a member of the audience wanted to know if she personally "believed" in the cosmology she had thoroughly committed herself to trying to understand. No, she said, she did not personally place credence in the major beliefs that she had made it her task to so earnestly understand. Yet it was obvious from the film of her work, and her oral presentation, that this woman had somewhat cleanly suspended her own cultural and personal belief system in order to step within the world of another culture, and to experience that culture and its activities, beliefs, and emotions from the frame of reference of those within it. I cannot help but think that we in communication have much to learn from cultural anthropologists about the art and science of putting one's self in the

position of another, and communicating accordingly.

It is also likely that we have something to learn about empathy from professional actors. A good actor is one who (among other things) seems to be able to de-center from his or her own personality and then enter into the personality and character and condition of "someone else." It may be that social scientists have not studied enough those who appear to be able to do this to a marked degree, and the methods they use and the implications of these for general empathy development. It may also be that we have lessons to learn in this regard from dancers, musicians, successful team athletes, and those who have advanced in any other synchronized activity that entails highly complex synchronized interpersonal coordination. This is not to say that these persons, actors or otherwise, will necessarily be empathic communicators, but that they might possess points of view and methods that could ultimately be applied toward that end in educational programs designed to maximize human empathy beyond pre-existing levels.

The three approaches mentioned in this paper (the search for supplemental paradigms, the recognition of empathic communication as multichannel process, and the study of highly empathic communicators) only scratch the surface of what might be done in the exploration of empathic communication development. This writer can easily think of other possible avenues of approach. For example, methods that rely upon imagination-visualization skills would probably be of use. Behavior Therapy, The American Journal of Clinical Hypnosis, and another half-dozen or so journals are filled with studies evidencing the usefulness of imagination in bringing about affective and behavioral change. It has been found within our own discipline that a single session of positively-imagined successful speechmaking

resulted in significantly less speech anxiety than in a comparable control group.²⁸ It may be that, in a similar way, the mind could employ creative visualizations that would be of use in enhancing one's ability to experience and express empathy. In fact, there are data to this effect.²⁹ The point is that once we begin to let our minds roam free in the search for approaches to empathy-building, there is no shortage of possibilities. The reader has most likely already envisioned others of these, or easily could.

At this point, we in communication studies cannot claim that we can provide a comprehensive, systematic, measurably effective program for maximizing empathic communication behaviors. Since it is clear that empathy is a multi-dimensional cognitive-affective-social macroprocess, nothing less than multi-methodological approaches are likely to suffice. It is time to let the search begin. The title of an article by David Aspy, appearing in a counseling journal a decade ago, is very much to the point: 'Empathy: Let's Get the Hell On With It.'³⁰

FOOTNOTES

1. Ronald D. Gordon, "Empathy: The State of the Art and Science," paper presented at the International Conference of the World Communication Association, Baguio, Republic of the Philippines, August 10, 1985.
2. Gordon, pp. 2-5.
3. Gary Cronkhite, Communication and Awareness (Menlo Park: Cummings Publishing Company, 1976), p. 80.
4. One published experiment has examined the effects of an interpersonal communication course on students' overall "interpersonal competence," including empathy, but scores were combined for analysis in such a way that the effects on empathy in particular are not known. Further, the dependent measure consisted of a paper-and-pencil multiple-choice instrument; no behavioral assessment of interpersonal competence was attempted. See Cynthia Berryman-Fink and Lucille Pederson, "Testing the Effects of a Competency-Based Interpersonal Communication Course," Southern Speech Communication Journal, 16 (1981), 251-262.
5. Even when the empathic skills training programs within the counseling field have been successful in raising empathic communication scores, the scores achieved are typically still at minimal empathy levels. See David Jacobs, "Successful Empathy Training," Journal of Humanistic Psychology, 21 (1981), 39-56.
6. For example, John Poulakos, "The Components of Dialogue," Western Speech, 33 (1974), 199-212.

7. Richard L. Johannesen, "The Emerging Concept of Communication As Dialogue," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 62 (1971), 373-382.
8. John Stewart, "Foundations of Dialogic Communication," Quarterly Journal of Speech, 64 (1978), 183-201.
9. Milton Mayeroff, On Caring (New York: Harper and Row, 1972).
10. Mayeroff, p. 2.
11. Mayeroff, p. 87.
12. Charles E. Gauss, "Empathy," in Dictionary of the History of Ideas: Studies of Selected Pivotal Ideas, Volume II, ed. Phillip P. Wiener (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1973), pp. 85-89.
13. Ronald C. Arnett and Gordon Nakagawa, "The Assumptive Roots of Empathic Listening: A Critique," Communication Education, 32 (1983), 368-378.
14. For discussion of these concepts I thank my friend and colleague, Professor Satoshi Ishii of Otsuma Women's University, Department of English and Speech, Tokyo, Japan.
15. This brief treatment of the contrasts between Eastern and Western thought has benefitted from the research of Dr. Trina Nahm-Miyo of the Psychology Discipline of the University of Hawaii, Hilo. She also brought to my attention Suzuki's treatment of Bashō and Tennyson (next citation). Also, see D. T. Suzuki, Introduction to Zen Buddhism (London: Rider, 1949).
16. D. T. Suzuki, Zen and Japanese Culture (New York: Princeton University Press, 1959), pp. 3-4.
17. For example, "What American Business Can Learn From Japan," U. S. News and World Report (October 12, 1981), p. 54; William S. Anderson, "What We Are Learning From Japan," Nation's Business (March 1981), pp. 39-41; Frank B. Bigney, "Now It's Time to Imitate the Japanese," Pacific Basin Quarterly (1981), pp. 17-18.

18. For example, Arthur W. Avery and Jake D. Thiessen, "Communication Skills Training for Divorcees," Journal of Counseling Psychology, 29 (1982), 203-205.

19. For example, Brent R. Burleson, "Social Cognition, Empathic Motivation, and Adults' Comforting Strategies," Human Communication Research, 10 (1983), 295-304; Wendy Samter and Brent R. Burleson, "Cognitive and Motivational Influences on Spontaneous Comforting Behavior," Human Communication Research, 11 (1984), 231-260.

20. Donald T. Tepper, Jr., and Richard F. Haase, "Verbal and Non-verbal Communication of Facilitative Conditions," Journal of Counseling Psychology, 25 (1978), 35-44.

21. Bruce R. Fretz, Roger Corn, Janet M. Tuemmler, and William Bellet, "Counselor Nonverbal Behaviors and Client Evaluations," Journal of Counseling Psychology, 26 (1979), 304-311.

22. For example, see William S. Condon, "The Relation of Interactional Synchrony to Cognitive and Emotional Processes," and Willet Kempton, "The Rhythmic Basis of Interactional Micro-Synchrony," both in Mary Ritchie Key (ed.), The Relationship of Verbal to Nonverbal Communication (The Hague: Mouton Publishers, 1980), pp. 49-65 and pp. 67-75; Adam Kendon, "Movement Coordination in Social Interaction: Some Examples Described," Acta Psychologica, 32 (1970), 100-125. For an interesting recent and related article in one of our own journals, see Normal Elliott, "Communicative Development from Birth," Western Journal of Speech Communication, 48 (1984), 184-196.

23. Richard E. Maurer and Jeffrey H. Tindall, "Effect of Postural Congruence on Client's Perceptions of Counselor Empathy," Journal of Counseling Psychology, 30 (1983), 158-163.

24. Karen Heller, "Heroes Back in Style: Clint No. 1," USA Today (April 15, 1985), p. 1.
25. See Martha A. Perry, "Modeling and Instructions in Training for Counselor Empathy," Journal of Counseling Psychology, 22 (1975), 173-179.
26. Virginia Fine and Mark Therrien, "Empathy in the Doctor-Patient Relationship," Journal of Medical Education, 52 (1977), 752-757.
27. John L. Barkai and Virginia O. Fine, "Empathy Training for Lawyers and Law Students," Southwestern University Law Review, 13 (1983).
28. Joe Ayres and Theodore S. Hopf, "Visualization: A Means of Reducing Speech Anxiety," unpublished manuscript, Washington State University, 1985. Also relevant is the technique of systematic desensitization, which includes visualization as a central component. See Susan P. Glaser, "Oral Communication Apprehension and Avoidance: The Current Status of Treatment Research," Communication Education, 30 (1981), 321-341.
29. Miho Toi and C. Daniel Batson, "More Evidence That Empathy Is A Source of Altruistic Motivation," Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 43 (1982), 281-292.
30. David N. Aspy, "Empathy: Let's Get the Hell On With It," Counseling Psychologist, 5 (1975), 10-14.